



Department of Justice

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EIGHT INDICTED IN IDENTITY THEFT RING

CINCINNATI - A federal grand jury here has indicted six people from Cincinnati, one from Columbus and one from Ross, Ohio charging them with conspiracy and fraud in connection with an identity theft ring that stole the personal information of hundreds of individuals in southern Ohio and resulted in nearly a half-million dollars in loss to individuals, financial institutions and retail businesses.

Gregory G. Lockhart, United States Attorney for the Southern District of Ohio; Gerald A. O'Farrell, Assistant Inspector in Charge, United States Postal Inspection Service; Kurt Douglass, Special Agent in Charge, United States Secret Service, and Chief Chris Wallace, Blue Ash Police Department, announced the indictment returned Wednesday, February 15.

The grand jury alleges 103 separate instances of passing counterfeit checks or making fraudulent credit transactions at stores in Ohio, Michigan and Kentucky between September 12, 2001 and January 12, 2006.

The 40-count indictment charges all eight with conspiracy to commit fraud.

The grand jury indicted the following individuals:

Traci Southerland, age 37, of Cincinnati. The indictment alleges that Southerland organized the conspiracy. She also faces three counts of bank fraud and eight counts of identity fraud.

Muriel Murdock, age 30, of Cincinnati. Murdock allegedly worked with Southerland to obtain personal information of unsuspecting and potential victims. She also faces three counts of bank fraud, eight counts of identification fraud, and one count of counterfeiting.

Frances Robertson, age 40, of Cincinnati. Robertson allegedly used victims' identities to open credit accounts and pass counterfeit checks. Robertson also faces three counts of bank fraud and five counts of identity fraud.

Lashanta Hartman, age 27, of Columbus. Hartman allegedly used identifying information of unsuspecting victims to open new credit accounts, access existing credit accounts, and pass counterfeit checks. Hartman is also charged with three counts of bank fraud, eight counts of identity fraud, and one count of wire fraud.

Heather Klette, age 26, of Ross, Ohio. Klette allegedly passed counterfeit checks and stole other people's mail. Klette also faces three counts of bank fraud, five counts of identity fraud and two counts of theft of mail.

William Kelly, age 40, of Cincinnati. Kelly allegedly presented false identification to use credit accounts and returned the merchandise for cash. Kelly is also charged with two counts of identity theft.

Danielle Brock, age 37, of Cincinnati. Brock allegedly rented cars for use by the conspiracy, stored stolen items at her house, and cashed fraudulently obtained gift cards. Brock is also charged with two counts of identity theft.

Sharonda Washington, age 24, of Cincinnati. Washington allegedly obtained personal information of unsuspecting victims and presented counterfeit checks. Washington is also charged with two counts of identity theft.

All except for Klette are in custody. A trial date has not been set.

The punishment for the crimes are as follows:

Conspiracy to commit fraud: up to five years imprisonment.

Bank Fraud: up to 30 years imprisonment.

Identification fraud: up to two years imprisonment or up to 15 years imprisonment, depending on the type of the fraud involved.

Theft of mail: up to two years imprisonment.

Wire Fraud: Up to 30 years imprisonment.

Counterfeiting: Up to 25 years imprisonment.

Each crime also carries a fine of up to \$250,000 or twice the loss or gain.

Senior United States Judge S. Arthur Spiegel will preside over the case. Judge Spiegel will set a date for arraignment on all charges.

Lockhart commended the cooperative investigation by inspectors and agents from the U.S. Postal Inspection Service and the Secret Service, as well as Assistant U.S. Attorneys Amul Thapar and Benjamin Dusing, who are prosecuting the case.

An indictment is merely an accusation. All defendants are presumed innocent unless proven guilty in court.

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